



# BOTTOM UP FOR TOP DOWN

## Develop your sphere of influence to initiate change

**Can major change** happen from the bottom of an organization, or does it have to come from upper management? I can say from personal experience that the quickest way to initiate change with greatest chance at success is when senior leaders get it and drive the change from their level — top down. I can also say from personal experience that senior leaders don't always get it. They may have to be convinced of what is possible by showing them — bottom up.

Most books by famous captains of industry and other gurus say that for actual change to happen there must be an executive or senior leader who recognizes a “burning platform.” In the book, “The Heart of Change,” John Kotter and Dan Cohen call it increasing urgency — raising a feeling of urgency so that people start telling each other to do something about the problems and opportunities. The authors say you must reduce the complacency, fear, and anger that prevent change from occurring.

There is a problem with expecting top-down change to occur. Complacency, fear, and anger are strong barriers to change. Consider the case of an established old-guard-type executive. If you've worked hard over a long career to get where you are and you're comfortable in your current position, are you inclined to take on the risk of a major project? What if you're an up-and-comer in the middle of your career looking for the comfortable guy's job? Will you put your future on the line by championing a major project that may fail? There may be good reason to be risk-averse.

It may seem spineless, but the reality is that people don't get canned for a bold project that was never attempted. Nor does the organization benefit when the bold project never gets implemented.

Every year there is new technology, more data, more regulation, more tax policies, and competitors that want to take your market share. If an organization does nothing while competitors leverage technology and more efficiently execute processes, sooner or later you'll be going out of business.

As an experienced person, you see opportunities all around you. You know that by changing a process or policy, deploying some new method or tool, there will be major benefits. So, if you're a middle manager or lower level supervisor, how can you get senior leaders interested in change and get them over their complacency, fear, or anger?

Complacency occurs when staying where you are is more comfortable than making a change. Fear often is the result

of anxiety — not knowing. Anger often surfaces when there is injury to someone's ego. With these root causes in mind, a middle manager or lower-level supervisor can do three things to make it uncomfortable for senior leaders to do nothing.

First, figure out the opportunities within your sphere of influence. Your sphere of influence does not necessarily mean your direct reports. It also includes the people that you've developed working relationships or friendships with.

## **YOU MUST ACTUALLY MAKE THE IMPROVEMENT HAPPEN AND MAKE SURE THE RIGHT PEOPLE KNOW IT HAS HAPPENED.**

It's your informal network — the people who depend on you and the people you depend on to make things happen when they need to. The improvements do not have to be major, but they do have to be positive and tangible.

Second, and most importantly, you must actually make the improvement happen and make sure the right people know it has happened. And, if you can keep your ego in check, find a way for people up the chain to share in the success. This will increase your sphere of influence, and it will be more likely that you won't ruffle feathers of senior folks. They become allies, not angry obstacles.

Third, you must repeat steps one and two several times. Repeated successes that are communicated broadly will build a reputation for you and your fellow sphere inhabitants — a reputation built on a history of successes. As the successes pile up, it will be increasingly difficult for senior leaders to remain complacent. They will want to see what else you can do. Nothing reduces anxiety like the security of having “been there and done that.” It will be easier for senior leaders to move forward as their anxiety is reduced and the fear of failure is replaced by demonstrated results.

If you make it uncomfortable to do nothing, then bigger changes will happen. Remember, if the senior leaders remain complacent you can always be proud of the improvements you and your sphere-mates have made. ☺

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